


Chapter 7

Interdisciplinary Training in Special Education and Behavior Analysis to Meet the Needs of Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the value of providing interdisciplinary graduate training in special education and behavior analysis to prepare professionals to meet the high intensity needs of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Within the chapter, we provide a detailed description of the development, goals, and implementation of a master's-level interdisciplinary training program. The program was developed by special education and behavior analysis faculty at Western Michigan University (WMU). Scholars admitted into the program obtained a master's degree in special education or behavior analysis and met the requirements to become a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA). Special education scholars also met the requirements for a teaching endorsement in ASD. The program was supported by a personnel preparation grant funded by the Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP; Ehrhardt et al., 2017) and directed by Kristal Ehrhardt.

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THE NEED FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY TRAINING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AND BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS

Currently, the United States is experiencing a concerning convergence in special education services for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD); teacher attrition is increasing at a rate parallel to the increasing rate of students with disabilities. Forty-nine states and the District of Columbia report shortages of special educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The special educator shortage has resulted in some states using long-term substitutes for special education teachers, most of whom have *no* teacher training and some only have a high school diploma (HECSE, 2021). As teacher attrition increases, so does the number of students with ASD entering public school (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In 2020-21, ASD was the fourth-most prevalent disability category for students aged 6 through 21 years served under IDEA, Part B, accounting for 12% of all students served (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Unfortunately, the multi-faceted problem of the special education teacher shortage negatively affects outcomes for students (CEEDAR Center, 2020).

Given the severity of the special education teacher shortage across the country, federal-level solutions are needed. One federal-level strategy for addressing the special education teacher shortage is the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Personnel Development to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities program (PDP). The PDP supports personnel preparation and professional development of qualified personnel to work with infants or toddlers with disabilities and to serve and support children with disabilities. The purpose of the PDP is to help address state-identified needs for qualified personnel and to ensure personnel have the necessary skills and knowledge, derived from practices that have been determined through scientifically based research and experience, to be successful in serving those children. There are three types of PDP investments; one of these grants, *325K: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Preparation of Special Education, Early Intervention, and Related Services Personnel Serving Children with Disabilities who Have High-Intensity Needs*, provides funding for master's-level training. To qualify for the funding, a preparation program must be an interdisciplinary collaboration between two or more disciplines.

The interdisciplinary training program described in this chapter was possible, in part, because of OSEP PDP funding. Western Michigan University received PDP funding to develop and implement an interdisciplinary training program designed to increase the number of qualified personnel available to meet the unique and intense needs of students with ASD. The high intensity needs of children with ASD often arise because they exhibit challenging behaviors that are not part of the defining features of the disorder, as well as the kinds of behavioral excesses and deficits required for the diagnosis (Heute et al., 2014). Students with ASD are characterized by restricted and repetitive behaviors/interests and impairments in social communication (American Psychiatric Association; DSM-5) and have increased susceptibility to emotional and behavioral difficulties, including anxiety emotional dysregulation, inattention, and disruptive behaviors (Baker & Blacher, 2019; Leyfer et al., 2006; Samson et al., 2014). These behavioral excesses and deficits pose unique challenges in educational settings. Teachers report that the greatest challenges of instructing students with autism are behavior difficulties and inappropriate social skills (Teffs & Whitbread, 2009). Additionally, students with ASD can demonstrate deficits in observational learning (Townley-Cochran et al., 2015), which hinders their passive learning. Because of these characteristics of students with ASD, teachers must use specialized, evidence-based practices (EBPs) to serve them effectively (Scheurmann et al., 2003).

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